

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

For a month now, we have been steadily working our way through the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John that began with the story of Jesus feeding a multitude with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, and then walking on the water to a boatful of disciples who immediately reached their destination when they wanted to take Jesus into the boat. The next morning, some of the people who had been fed the day before followed Jesus to Capernaum, his home. There, he told them that he, himself, was the bread of life that comes down from heaven.

Last week, we heard Jesus make the rather startling claim that “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” This claim is so startling that many of those who heard it expressed their opposition to it. In fact, this claim is still so shocking and scandalous that the people who put our lectionary readings together thought we’d better hear it again. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” This *is* a hard teaching, difficult to hear and comprehend. To this day, many Protestants and some Episcopalians find this statement so jarring and difficult to take in that they can tune out the invitation at the heart of it.

Jesus is inviting the disciples to abide in him—to be *at home* in him, just as he is at home in God.

In the reading from First Kings, we heard part of the story of Solomon building an earthly house for God in Jerusalem, and installing the Ark of the Covenant as the holy of holies within the Temple. Solomon sensed the questionability of his project. “[W]ill God indeed dwell on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.” Solomon recast his expectations to ask God to hear from heaven the prayers of both Israelite and foreigner who pray toward God’s dwelling on earth, in the direction of the Temple, that is. Even as he built a house for God, Solomon realized that the heart of the matter is not the *place* so much as it is the person of God who may dwell in the Temple or remain out and about in the world.

When we recited Psalm 84—a love song for the Temple that Solomon built for God—we used the kind of intimate and emotional language that we usually

reserve for people: “How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of Hosts! My soul has a desire and a longing for the courts of the Lord.” And there is something worth holding dear, isn’t there, in our gratitude for those physical houses of God that provide a place for people to encounter the Holy One—a home where God abides. “The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; by the side of your altars, O Lord of Hosts.” The occasional woodpecker also apparently finds a home here, although not by the side of the altar and a bit less gracefully—damaging the house that we would otherwise be *more* than happy to share!

And this is a house that we love, is it not? We love it and we uphold it as a place for people who have not yet come and for people who will come long after we are gone. We appreciate that this building, like all human things, are trivial if they exist for nothing beyond themselves.

We can empathize with Solomon’s desire to create a home for God. So we, too, can pray Psalm 84 wholeheartedly as an expression of our love for this place as though it were a living entity. But there is something beyond just maintaining a building for posterity, even one dedicated to God. What separates this place from a museum is found in the scandal of John’s Gospel.

Jesus declares: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Then he asks his complaining disciples, “Does this scandalize you?” “Scandal” is the root of the Greek word translated as “offend,” but I find a more intriguing path when the question is rendered as something more like “does my teaching scandalize you?” as if to ask “does my teaching cause you to stumble?”—a question immediately followed by another: “Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

Now, I don’t hear Jesus chastising his disciples as though they were thick-headed idiots. No, I hear Jesus warning his followers about the approaching passion. The light of the Spirit, a gift granted by God, will need to be strong in them so that they will not stumble in the darkness that lies ahead.

But some disciples did go away, scandalized. Again, the meaning is even stronger in the Greek. “Many turned back.” That is to say, many of the disciples not only turned aside from Jesus, but also returned to where they had been before meeting him. They “no longer went about with him.” They did not abide with him.

The picture that John's Gospel draws for us may not be pretty, but it is a recognizable pattern. Jesus has been surrounded by good folks who wanted to trust and who may even have been trying to trust, but people who in the end just couldn't quite give themselves to the mystery.

And then there are those who remained—the handful who *could* find it within themselves to walk toward the looming darkness in a state of unknowing. As some of the people turn back to their former lives, Jesus asks his innermost circle, the twelve: “Do you also wish to go away?” And Simon Peter answers: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Now, some may hear Peter's response to be a confession of weakness, as if he were saying: “We're *afraid* to go anywhere else” or “we have no other options or resources.” But I hear Peter saying something very different. I hear the words of a lover as full of emotion and intimacy as the words of Psalm 84. I hear Peter saying: “You, Holy One of God, you have fulfilled me, enchanted me and captivated me. You are my whole life and you offer your whole life to us—all of who you are, body, mind and soul. How could I ever be satisfied with anything less?”

So—Peter and the others who remained—what made them *different* from those who turned back? Why were they able to trust where so many good people *still* falter? Peter and the other disciples weren't spiritual geniuses any more than those who stumbled were spiritual chumps. Those who remained were plagued by doubt and fear; they gave in to pride and faint-heartedness; and they eventually deserted Jesus when he needed them most. So if they weren't more spiritually mature, more fearless, more selfless or more loyal, what was it that set them apart?

One thing. *One thing* set them apart: Peter knew where to look. “Lord, to whom can we go? *You* have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” We share that one thing with Peter, along with all of our own faults and missteps. We know where to look. The Real Presence of the Risen Christ abides here in us and we in him.

God is, of course, at work in other places. Creation fairly pulses with God's presence and activity in nature, in other parts of the world, in other cultures, in families of all kinds, and in the hearts of every human being in one way or another. In all these places, God continues to be present, actively creating and sustaining the whole creation. But before people can experience God

*everywhere*, they must experience God *somewhere*. And so we set this house apart and made it holy, and we love it because we look for and find God here.

When nature turns violent in floods or wildfires; when political discourse decays into name-calling; when racial tensions flare or get suppressed; when a family begins to disintegrate; when a church dissolves into a house of pain and division—when all the things we usually count on come up empty and we no longer know where to turn, we will *always* find the Risen Christ in the Eucharist.

Through simple water, oil, bread and wine, God promises and grants forgiveness, healing and life. God has bound God's self to the Word of Eternal Life and through the Word to ordinary matter of our everyday life, so that you and I and others may come to trust more and more that the Risen Christ abides with us and we with him.

And as we express our love for God in this house—a house set aside and holy, and welcoming to all—some who turned away will find our doors open to them. And more people will respond for the first time to the seed that God has planted in every human heart so that this will be a house of God for generations to come—a house where people come to receive and to share God's tangible and mystical promise to stay with us, hold onto us and love us eternally.